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- 2. Go to www.the39clues.com.
- 3. Click on "My Cards."
- 4. Enter the ten-digit Rapid Fire code to unlock a digital card and Top Secret Vesper file!

The code fragment for this story is: Fi

Are you ready to save the world?



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Eleven Months After the Clue Hunt

Fifteen-year-old Amy Cahill had seen a lot of angry faces on the hunt for the 39 Clues. The museum guards who'd screamed at her in countless languages. The backstabbing family members she'd outwitted. Those furious Benedictine monks. But none of those expressions quite matched the look of pure loathing on Saladin's face as the silver cat glared at Amy, his whiskers twitching with rage.

"I'm *sorry*, Saladin," she said, trying to suppress a smile. "I don't know where the contractor put the laundry room key. I'll have to find it later, okay?" She glanced down at her watch. The other Cahills would be here any minute, and she still hadn't figured out where the movers had stashed the extra bedding.

The cat flattened his ears. Amy reached out to scratch his fluffy head, but he pulled back and hissed. Ever since they'd moved into their grandmother Grace's partially rebuilt mansion, Saladin had taken possession of the small laundry room next to the kitchen. Normally, the regal cat would've turned up his damp nose at such undignified accommodations, but it was the only spot in the new house where he would sleep. After four months of crisscrossing the globe with his Clue-hunting owners, the cat had made it clear that his traveling days were over. Amy wasn't an expert in feline psychology, but she was pretty sure the cat figured if he slept under the dryer, there was less of a chance that he'd be kidnapped in the middle of the night and whisked off to Tibet.

It had been almost a year since they'd returned to Massachusetts, but Saladin wasn't the only member of the Cahill family who was having trouble adjusting. Amy had known it was going to be difficult — how did you go from a global hunt for the most valuable secret on Earth to biology class with Mrs. Schneider, who always smelled like onion soup? But she hadn't expected the nightmares. Or the strange flutter in her chest that never went away, no matter how many deep breaths she took.

A thunderous crash shook the kitchen, causing Saladin to leap off the counter and Amy to duck for cover.

She certainly hadn't expected a little brother with a death wish.

"Dan!" Amy screamed, turning toward the ceiling, which was, miraculously, still intact. "Dan!" She groaned as she rose slowly to her feet. The kickboxing class she'd been taking left her muscles feeling like they'd been run over by a steamroller. She stepped forward and winced. Maybe it wasn't too late to reschedule this afternoon's rock-climbing lesson.

She limped toward the stairs but forced herself to walk up properly. *This is how you get stronger*, she told herself. Amy glanced down at her gold watch and tried to ignore the image that flashed through her head. The silver knife glittering in the cold sunlight. The smile on the Vesper agent's face as he fingered the blade. She'd thought they'd be safe after the Clue hunt ended, but it

turned out she and Dan were in more danger than ever. Their family's historic enemy, the Vespers, had chosen this moment to emerge from the shadows. Amy and Dan had barely survived the first attack. Next time, they might not be so lucky.

She pushed herself up another step and grimaced. *Next time, I won't have to count on luck*. She paused as the burning in her calves crept up the backs of her legs, but the pain was nothing compared to the fear that had been growing in her stomach. *Next time, we'll be ready*.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she saw her younger brother, Dan, sitting amid a mound of broken wood and shattered glass.

Or, at least, I'll be ready.

Dan's new snowboard was strapped to his feet and his hair was matted with white flakes. Except it wasn't snow — it was plaster from the ceiling. Three construction workers were standing nearby, laughing. One was taking a photo of Dan with his cell phone. The grin on her brother's face was so wide Amy didn't bother asking if he was okay and went straight into phase two of big-sister interrogation. "What are you doing?" she hissed, trying to keep her voice low.

"Practicing my ollies."

"It's August."

"I know. That's why I installed a snow machine in the backyard."

"You what?"

"It's awesome. You gotta try it. You get really wicked air coming off the roof." He glanced at the mess around him and cocked his head to the side. "Though I might have miscalculated." He popped up without undoing the straps and took a hop toward the stairs. "I think I'll land it this time." He looked over at the man with the phone. "Ready, Joe?"

Amy turned sharply, ignoring the twinge of pain in her stiff lower back as she forced a smile. "Sorry, Joe, but, um, instead of filming Dan, do you think you guys could try to finish the gymnastics room in the basement?" Joe lowered his phone and raised his eyebrows. The burning sensation in Amy's cheeks grew worse than the pain in her legs as she saw the other two men try to contain their chuckles. She knew they weren't used to getting orders from a fifteen-year-old, but their guardian, Nellie, was at school and Uncle Fiske had disappeared once he heard that six Cahill kids were coming for the weekend. "I mean, um, if you have t-t-time," she said, stumbling over the words like she'd stumbled over the tires she'd installed in the new obstacle course out back.

Joe shot a look over his shoulder, then turned to Amy. "Sure thing, Miss Cahill," he said, smirking.

Amy stared at her toes until the men trudged past her, and then looked up at Dan. "Are you crazy? Even if you manage to go the afternoon without *breaking your neck*, you're supposed to be helping me get the house ready. We're seriously behind schedule." Not counting the damage caused by Hurricane Dweeb, the place was still a mess. Although the construction workers had finished the bedrooms and the library and had moved on to the upstairs command center, the floors were still covered with plastic tarps and scattered tools. "Ian and Natalie's flight landed an hour ago, and the Holts are going to be here any minute. I can't believe you haven't been getting ready."

Amy had invited the Kabras, the Holts, and Jonah Wizard to Attleboro for a reunion — the first time the kids would be together since the Clue hunt ended. Amy had told them that she had some activities planned, but no one except Dan knew why she was so keen to host a training weekend. Apart from their guardians and their lawyer, Mr. McIntyre, none of the other Cahills knew that the Vespers had tried to attack Amy and Dan in order to steal a family heirloom — an ancient gold ring. Although the ring was now safely concealed in her custom-designed watch, Amy still shivered

thinking about that day. Since the attack, Casper Wyoming, a Vesper assassin, had become such a regular fixture in Amy's nightmares he should have been paying rent for the privilege of haunting the darkest caverns of her mind. She generally woke up from these dreams with her heart beating so loudly she couldn't hear the faint ticking of the watch. Sometimes, as her pulse slowed and her breathing returned to normal, the sound comforted her with its steady, familiar beat. Other times, the ticking sent chills down her spine, as if it were counting down the minutes until the next Vesper strike.

That's why it was so important to make sure she and Dan were prepared. That *all* the Cahills were prepared. Amy knew it was only a matter of time before the Vespers attacked, and there was no knowing which of them was going to be caught in the cross fire. She thought about the schedule she had spent hours preparing for this weekend. Tonight they'd have their first cryptography lesson, in case they needed to send coded messages in the future. She'd even arranged for an MIT professor to come to the house to lead the session. In the morning, they'd have tumbling and jujitsu practice in the gymnastics room . . . if Joe and his crew finished up in time. And then skydiving lessons that afternoon. Amy had tried to include Dan in her planning, but despite the fact that he'd almost died in the first Vesper attack, he generally acted like Amy was crazy. And today was no different.

"I am getting stuff ready," he said, rolling his eyes. "I ordered fifteen cases of Red Bull and twenty jumbo tubs of Sour Patch Kids with the purple ones already picked out. It's amazing what you can do when you're rich." A manic smile spread across his face, as if just thinking about the snacks had given him a sugar high. "I can't wait to show Hamilton the wave machine I got for the pool. He's going to teach me to surf before our trip to Fiji!" His expression darkened slightly. "It's a crazy-long flight. They have Wii in first class, right? Maybe I should look into booking a private jet."

He unbuckled the straps on his snowboard and had begun walking toward his new bedroom when Amy grabbed his shoulder. She might not be able to stand up to smirking construction workers, or even a sullen Egyptian Mau, but she could certainly handle her little brother. But just as she was about to explain where she'd like to send him on a private jet, the doorbell rang. Amy looked up at the security monitor on the wall; she'd had one installed on every floor of the house. Despite her frustration with Dan, she couldn't help but smile at the sight of the three Holt kids standing on the front steps. There was sixteen-year-old Hamilton gaping at the enormous house, ignoring his twelve-year-old twin sisters, Madison and Reagan, as they elbowed each other out of the way, each trying to be the one to stick her tongue out at the security camera.

"They're heeeere!" Dan hollered as he shook off Amy's hand and bounded down the stairs.

By the time Amy reached the front door, Dan had already disabled the high-tech air lock and was letting the Holts inside. He fist-pumped Hamilton and waved at Madison and Reagan, who had stopped fighting and were looking wide-eyed around the foyer.

- "Whoa," Madison whistled, craning her neck to examine the chandelier.
- "This is even fancier than Red Lobster," Reagan said with awe.
- "Look at this rich people's hockey-stick holder," Madison said as she ran a slightly grubby finger along the edge of the antique umbrella stand. "I want one!"
 - "Ames!" Hamilton shouted and scooped her into a bear hug that lifted her off the ground.
- "Ouch!" Amy yelped, causing Hamilton to release her. "Sorry," she said, smiling as she rubbed her shoulder. "I'm just a little sore."

Madison nodded gravely. "Smart people books are pretty heavy."

- "No, I'm sore from all the training I've been —"
- "Don't talk to me about sore," a voice called from the door. Amy looked up to see Natalie Kabra lugging an enormous monogrammed suitcase into the foyer. "Mum canceled our frequent flyer miles,

so we had to go *business class*." She shuddered, causing her pink, ruffled dress to sway dramatically. "The seats were horribly uncomfortable, and there wasn't even a masseuse!"

The word *mum* made Amy flinch slightly. Natalie's breezy tone made her sound like a normal teenager complaining about her mother, but Amy knew that Isabel Kabra wasn't punishing her children for missing curfew or not cleaning their rooms. She'd disowned them for betraying her during the Clue hunt, for choosing to work with the other teams instead of murdering them. As she stared at the perfectly groomed twelve-year-old, Amy had trouble believing that she'd ever seen Natalie covered in dirt and blood. But Amy knew there was a reason the fashionista was wearing tights in August, and it wasn't because she'd seen it in British *Vogue*. Natalie was covering a scar on her foot — a bullet wound from her own mother.

The Clue hunt had brought the siblings face-to-face with the gruesome realities of their family's centuries-old feud, but Amy couldn't think about the final confrontation with Isabel without feeling like she was going to throw up. She shivered as she recalled the image of Natalie crumpled on the ground.

"Well, that's quite a greeting." The clipped cadences of Ian Kabra's voice brought Amy back to reality. "Is it customary in your country to take ill when guests arrive? It doesn't say much for American hospitality."

Amy pushed her hair behind her ears and stealthily tried to whisk away the beads of sweat that had gathered on her forehead. She took a deep breath and smiled. "Hi!" she said, a bit louder than she meant to. Ian raised one eyebrow and Amy felt the beginnings of a blush. She started to give Ian a hug, but he had already bent forward to kiss her on the cheek. Her sudden movement threw him off, and they ended up bumping foreheads.

"Sorry," Amy said, turning away so Ian wouldn't see that her face had turned bright red.

"Quite all right. I had forgotten you do things differently across the pond." He took a step back to look at Amy. "I take it jeans are the latest in evening wear here in the wild west?" He made an exaggerated show of narrowing his eyes. "Is that a juice stain on your blouse? How fetching."

Amy tried to ignore the prickle on her skin caused by Ian's gaze. As usual, he was dressed like a model from a country club brochure. But even though the expensive shirt and perfectly pressed khakis looked the same as always, there was something different about him. The old Ian had mastered the art of always looking like he was waiting for his private jet, maintaining a confident, slightly bored demeanor at all times. This Ian stood with his shoulders a little hunched and his arms folded across his chest, as if he were trying to protect something deep inside of him — or trying to keep something from spilling out.

"Juice stains will be the least of your worries when I'm done with you," Amy said, avoiding Ian's eyes. "I have a big weekend planned for all of us. Come on, I'll show you guys to the dorms." She turned around and motioned for Ian to follow her up the stairs.

"Dorms?" Amy heard Natalie call from behind her. "You're joking, right?"

"Don't worry," Hamilton said as he raced ahead, carrying both his and Natalie's suitcases. "Madison doesn't sleepwalk anymore."

"Bring that back!" Natalie shouted as she ran up after him. "I'm going to stay at the Ritz-Carlton."

"Is that where they make the crackers?" Madison asked. "I'm coming, too!"

Amy tilted her head down to check her watch. "Hey, Dan," she called without looking up. "Make sure everyone meets in the library in a hour, okay?"

There was no answer, only a loud thud from upstairs, followed by a muffled "whoo-hoo." Amy

winced as the chandelier began to sway. "Dan?" She raised her head and glanced around the foyer. She was all alone.



Two hours later, Amy was forced to accept that her weekend schedule might have been a tad ambitious. She gave a weak smile to Professor Morris, the MIT instructor whom she'd paid to lead their cryptography workshop. They were sitting across from each other in the otherwise empty library, a perfect replica of Amy's favorite room in Grace's old house. The sun was setting, and amber light spilled through the openings in the maroon curtains that grazed the floor like elegant ball gowns. Amy had spent months tracking down the same oak bookshelves that had lined the walls, and was still in the process of filling them. It broke her heart to think of the thousands of books that had been lost in the fire that destroyed the original mansion — almost as painful as losing a friend. After Amy's parents died, Grace's library had become the only place she felt truly safe. She used to spend hours curled up in the window seat, poring through her favorite books, grateful for the opportunity to spend time with people she knew would never leave her.

Amy wished she could pull out a book right now. Anything to avoid making small talk with the stern man scowling at her from across the room. With each passing moment, the silence grew heavier, until Amy could almost feel it pressing against her skin. The door pushed open and Amy sighed — finally, someone else had arrived. But it was just Saladin. The Mau strode across the room, his tail held high, and promptly began to rub against Professor Morris's leg, leaving a layer of long silver hairs clinging to the professor's wool trousers.

"Saladin," Amy chided, grateful for an excuse to break the silence. "Stop it."

Professor Morris grimaced slightly, then stood up. "I'm sorry, Miss Cahill, but I don't have all evening. It appears that the other students have more pressing obligations, so if you'll excuse me."

Amy jumped up from her chair. "No! I mean, just five more minutes. They're all in the house . . . somewhere. I'll go look again." She dashed toward the door, leaving Professor Morris and Saladin staring at each other.

I'm going to kill them, Amy thought as she ran up the stairs, ignoring the pain in her protesting muscles. But then a grim truth surfaced through her rage. Or the Vespers will do it for me.

She slowed down when she reached the top of the stairs, taking care not to slip on the plastic tarp that covered the floor. The top level of the house — the site of their new command center — was still under construction. The lights were off, but there were sounds coming from the end of the hallway. Amy stepped carefully over a clump of wires and turned sideways to avoid bumping into a tower of cardboard boxes. A thin sliver of light shone from under the door to the screening room Amy had built in order to analyze surveillance footage and host video chats with Cahills around the world. She opened the door and gasped. Dan, Hamilton, and Madison were hurtling across the room, vaulting over the rows of leather armchairs as they swatted one another with plastic lightsabers. Amy didn't even have to look at the screen to know that *Star Wars* was playing. The volume was up so loud that the room shook every time Darth Vader exhaled. She marched up to the control panel and shut the system off.

"Noooo!" Dan yelled, rushing toward her with his lightsaber waving in the air.

Amy grabbed the weapon and held it above her head. "What are you guys *doing*?" she demanded. "I told you we were meeting in the library. There's a guest speaker." She took a breath and

forced herself to smile. "We're going to practice code-breaking. It'll be fun!"

Dan rolled his eyes at Hamilton. "I told you she's lost it."

"Cuckoo," Madison said, making a she's so crazy gesture.

Amy felt her chest tighten as she dropped the lightsaber. She was used to people laughing at her. But Grace's house had always been the one place where no one made fun of her. Where she had felt safe. The Clue hunt had stolen that from her as well.

Dan's mocking smile faded as he stared at Amy. For a moment, he looked like a little boy again. But then his expression hardened. "Come on, guys. I think Reagan and Natalie are in the pool. Let's use the scuba gear to sneak up on them." Hamilton and Madison dropped their lightsabers and bounded out of the room. Amy could hear their shouts echoing down the hall. Dan stayed where he was, facing Amy but not quite meeting her eyes. "We're allowed to have fun, you know." He stared at the wall over Amy's shoulder. "After all we've been through, we deserve it."

Amy was tempted to stretch her hand out and ruffle his hair, but something kept her still. "We need to be ready. They're coming for us, Dan."

He turned his head and looked at her with an expression she'd never seen before. The room was dark, and the weak light shining through the window cast a strange shadow on his face. He walked over to the discarded lightsaber and picked it up, holding it out in front of him like an archaeologist examining a relic from another era. "I know they are," he said, without facing her. "But there's nothing we can do." He turned around and walked slowly out of the room.



The vast backyard was dark and still. He knew from hacking into her bank account that the girl had spent almost half a million dollars on security. Between the electric fence, motion sensors, and bodyheat detectors, there hadn't been so much as a squirrel on the grass in six months.

But he was no squirrel.

The searchlight beam passed over the yard like a great white shark gliding lazily over the ocean floor.

He smiled as he stepped under the shadow of a large oak tree, and looked up at the light shining faintly from the third-floor window. According to the surveillance footage, Amy often spent the night in her command center trying to gain information about her new enemy. And yet she had found nothing.

Vesper One turned around and began walking through the darkness, guided by the low drone of the electric fence. When he reached the edge of the lawn, he removed a small device from his pocket, held it against the barrier, and pushed the button. There was a loud buzz, then silence.

Vesper One scaled the fence with ease, landing noiselessly on the other side. He'd already arranged for Vesper Six to take care of the children.

In the distance, he heard a crash, followed by a chorus of laughter and angry shouts.

Or perhaps they'd save Six the trouble and remove themselves from the equation.

Either way, he had other business to attend to.

As he stepped forward, a black car pulled up to the curb as if he'd conjured it from the shadows. Vesper One slid into the backseat and closed the door. "Boston." There was one final item to attend to before he could put his plan in motion. It was time to eliminate the last Guardian.



The next morning Jonah Wizard arrived fresh off his concert tour via helicopter at six a.m. and landed on the front lawn, triggering the alarm system. By the time Amy had convinced the Attleboro police department that everything was under control, the other Cahills had gone back to bed and slept through the tumbling lessons. Most of them came down in time for jujitsu training, but once it became clear that Madison's idea of a "light tap" could knock out a linebacker, the crowd began to dwindle.

The worst part of it was that every time Amy tried to get their attention, they ignored her. It didn't matter that she'd spent months arranging for expert linguists and champion martial artists to come to the house. Every time she raised her voice loud enough to make them look at her, she blushed and began to stutter. Yet it wasn't the wasted time or money that bothered Amy. It was the fact that these people weren't strangers. They were her family. She'd thought that, after everything they'd gone through, they'd be excited to work together. But it was as if the events of last year had never happened.

At least the skydiving trip seemed to be working out. The Holts were excited to go, and everyone else had been too tired to argue. The bus Amy had chartered was silent as they drove through the Bristol County countryside toward the private airstrip. Everyone was asleep except for Amy and Jonah, who had been oddly quiet since his arrival that morning.

Amy was sitting in the row behind Jonah and watched as he pulled out his iPhone and turned to face the window. He fiddled with it for a moment, and the glow from the screen illuminated his famous face. The phone remained lit just long enough for Amy to see the corner of Jonah's mouth droop before the phone went dark. He sighed softly and put the phone away.

Amy reached forward and tapped him on the shoulder. "Are you okay?"

He turned toward her. "A-Dawg. I didn't know you were awake."

"Of course you didn't," she said, a little more bitterly than she'd intended. "I could've died and no one would've noticed."

"You shouldn't talk like that. Not after what we survived." He must have seen the distress in her face, because he flashed his superstar smile. "Besides, sometimes it's nice to stay under the radar."

"Easy for you to say. Was that your publicist you were texting? Or the president of your Facebook fan club?" She meant it as a joke and was surprised when Jonah's face fell. "I'm sorry," Amy said. "It's none of my business."

"No, it's fine." He bit his lip, something Amy had never seen him do before, either in person, onstage, or during his countless television appearances. "I just thought that maybe my mom would try to get in touch or something." He turned his head back to the window. "It's my birthday," he said quietly.

"Your birthday?" Amy repeated. "Why didn't you tell us? I would've baked you a cake." She smiled. "Though I'm sure your fans will be sending you stuff all week."

He didn't smile back. "Only my mom and dad know my real birthday. It's something we tried to keep private, just for us, you know?" He glanced down at his sweatshirt, as if he expected to see the glow of his phone through his pocket. "But I guess she forgot."

"You still haven't spoken to her?" Amy asked softly.

Jonah shook his head. "I waited for a few months after the end of the Clue hunt. You know, to give her time to calm down. But she won't return my calls, my texts, my e-mails, nothing."

Amy wasn't sure what to say. She knew far too well what it was like to be separated from your

parents, but at least she had the comfort of knowing that her mother would've given anything for one more moment with Dan and Amy. She reached over the top of Jonah's seat and squeezed his hand. "You did the right thing back there. No matter what she thinks."

"I know." The smile returned to his face. "Yo, are we almost there? The wiz is ready to show y'all what it really means to be fly."



Amy shivered as the wind rushed over her jumpsuit. Even though it was more than eighty degrees on the tarmac, her skin felt clammy. She'd spent the past three hours watching skydiving instructional videos and listening to the head instructor, Duncan, explain all the safety procedures. At least, she'd *tried* to pay attention. It had been difficult to hear over the sounds of Dan and Jonah laughing, Madison and Reagan wrestling, and Ian shouting on the phone at his stockbroker. Amy kept waiting for Duncan to tell everyone to quiet down, but he just kept droning on in a flat voice that made her think he was used to being ignored. And when Amy asked him to repeat something he'd said about proper landing technique, even Hamilton had told her to relax. They were all doing tandem jumps with experienced instructors and wouldn't even have to open their own parachutes. But although the rational part of Amy's brain knew that her instructor, Teodora, would take care of everything, she didn't like the idea of jumping out of a plane without knowing exactly what to do.

As the Cahills lined up to board the tiny aircraft, Amy began to question her decision to learn how to skydive. What were the chances of it coming in handy? After all, she and Dan had won the Clue hunt without having to use a parachute, and they'd been at the top of Mount Everest.

She watched as the other Cahills took turns climbing up the metal steps and ducking through the door. Madison was so excited she grabbed on to the railing and vaulted inside without even touching the stairs. Natalie took more demure steps but looked equally confident as she entered the plane. Once she learned their trip was being filmed, she had refused to don a jumpsuit and insisted on remaining in her designer jeans, then complained that her gear didn't match her stylish outfit. All the Cahill kids were wearing brightly colored harnesses and special packs that contained their backup parachutes.

When it was Amy's turn to climb the stairs, she paused. There was no way she was jumping out of a plane. "I can't do this," she whispered. She took a step backward.

"Making a quick getaway?"

Amy turned around and saw Teodora smiling at her. Petite with long blond hair, she looked like a porcelain doll in skydiving gear. "Don't worry," she said, putting her hand on Amy's shoulder. "It's going to be fine. I'll take care of everything."

It made Amy feel slightly better to know her harness would be attached to Teodora's, but not much. "Have you ever lost anyone?" Amy asked.

"Amy!" She turned her head and saw Dan pounding on the window from inside the plane. He mouthed something she couldn't understand, and when she shrugged her shoulders to show that she couldn't hear him, he started flapping his arms like a chicken.

"Oh, one or two," Teodora answered breezily. "I specialize in taking care of little brothers." She laughed and Amy felt herself relax. She liked Teodora, something about her reminded Amy of Nellie. It might have been her smile, or all her energy, but either way Teodora struck her as someone who liked to have fun.

Amy grabbed on to the railing and walked up the stairs. Right before she stepped inside, she

reached back to check, for the hundredth time, that her pack was still in place.

The noise inside the small plane was almost deafening, from the roar of the engines to the shouts of the Cahills yelling at one another from their seats. Amy and Teodora sat down in the back row and fastened their seat belts. A few minutes later, they were airborne.

Amy pressed her nose to the window to watch the ground fall away as they quickly gained altitude. It was a clear day, so it was possible to make out small details in the scene below. Tiny cars wound their way along twisty roads. Miniature houses perched on hilltops and peeked out of clearings. The Atlantic Ocean sparkled in the distance. It all looked so peaceful that it was difficult to believe she would soon be hurtling toward it at one hundred miles per hour.

She looked down at the enormous watchlike object on her left wrist. It was an altimeter, a device for measuring altitude. All skydivers had to wear them — even beginners doing tandem dives. On the off chance that something happened to an instructor, the student would need to know when to activate the chute. Thank goodness she'd been able to hear Duncan during that portion of the training. They were supposed to open their parachutes when they reached 2,000 feet. Or was it 4,000? She was about to ask Teodora when Duncan unbuckled his seat belt and stood up. "Okay, guys!" he shouted. His voice was suddenly cheerful. Amy had a feeling he was happy to be pushing them all out of the plane. "It's time to go." The noise inside the cabin died down as the Cahills concentrated on hooking their harnesses to their partners. Reagan was bouncing up and down with excitement, causing her instructor to look slightly seasick.

They all grabbed on to the bars lining the walls as Duncan opened the door and, suddenly, Amy couldn't concentrate on anything besides the roar of the wind. She closed her eyes to keep the air from stinging them. It was like standing on a cliff in the middle of a hurricane.

She opened her eyes just in time to see Hamilton flash the group a thumbs-up. He and his instructor, Jason, waited for Duncan to give them the go-ahead, and then tumbled out the door. They flew sideways and disappeared from view. Amy felt her pulse start to race even faster. Could fifteen-year-olds have heart attacks? She tightened her grip on the bar and went over everything they'd learned during their training.

Keep your back arched for stability.

Keep your arms and legs at equal distances to maintain control.

Try not to die. . . .

Amy watched the other pairs make their way to the door and jump out one by one. When it was Dan's turn, she felt her stomach twist. But before she had a chance to say anything, he was gone.

Now, it was just Teodora and Amy. The instructor tapped Amy on the shoulder to let her know that it was time to head to the door. They took small, shuffling steps. It was awkward to walk while attached to another person.

They paused when they reached the door and held on to the bar that ran next to it. Amy closed her eyes tightly. The sight of the empty blue air made her nauseous. She heard Duncan shout something and she opened her eyes again. Instead of waiting for them to jump, Duncan nodded at Teodora, grabbed on to the bar, rocked back and forth a few times, and then pushed himself out of the plane.

Amy twisted her head to ask Teodora what was going on. Why had Duncan gone first and left them alone? She felt her chest tighten. Had something gone wrong with one of the other pairs? Amy wanted to peek out the door, but her feet were locked in place.

She heard a faint clicking noise and, suddenly, Teodora was next to her, casually holding on to the bar. Amy inhaled sharply. She must have unbuckled the straps holding them together. Amy was now standing inches from the open door, with nothing but a metal bar keeping her from tumbling out of

the plane. She tried to grab on even tighter, but her hand had grown sweaty and was beginning to slip.

"Where is it?" Teodora demanded in a low voice. She was no longer smiling.

"What?" Amy yelled back. She didn't remember this part from the training video.

"You really want to play dumb at ten thousand feet? Where is the ring?" Teodora's entire face changed as she snarled at Amy.

A wave of terror coursed over Amy that had nothing to do with the perils of jumping out of a plane. Teodora was a Vesper.

Amy took a step sideways away from the door and pressed up against the wall. She put one arm behind her back. "I can't tell you," she said as firmly as she could, given the fact that her knees were shaking and sweat was pouring down her neck.

Teodora reached into the pocket of her jumpsuit and pulled out a small black gun. "Let's not waste time, okay? I have a gun. I want your ring. You're a smart girl. You don't have many options in this situation."

Amy shot a desperate look toward the cockpit, but it was locked. There was no way to get the pilot's attention. And for all she knew, he was a Vesper, too.

The anger and adrenaline that had allowed her to stand up to Casper Wyoming didn't come this time. Amy was alone with a gun-wielding Vesper. Her eyes darted toward the exit. The only way out was through the door of a plane 10,000 feet above the ground.

Teodora snorted. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. There's a reason novice jumpers do tandem dives. Most beginners end up frozen with shock, so they can't even open their own chutes." She took a step toward Amy. "You *really* don't want to splatter in front of all your friends." She shuddered dramatically. "Have you ever seen a body hit the ground? *So* gross. And now, if you don't mind . . ." Teodora held her hand to her ear, as if Amy were about to whisper the secret.

The plane banked slightly to the right, and Amy felt her body sway toward the door. She grabbed back on to the bar with her other hand.

Teodora smirked. "You have five seconds to tell me where it is or I'll shoot." Her smile widened. "Skydiving *and* murder. My favorite kind of day."

An extra-strong gust of wind blew through the plane, and Amy felt herself being pulled toward the door. She planted her feet onto the floor. "NO."

The Vesper rolled her eyes. "Fine, then. But if I get blood in my hair, I'm going to kill your brother, too. Just saying. Five . . . four . . ."

Amy had only a split second to choose between two dreadful options — hand over the ring and have Teodora shoot her anyway. Or take her chances in thin air.

It was as if someone had hacked into Amy's brain and taken control of her body. She spun around, grabbed on to the side of the door, and jumped.

There was a loud bang and something whizzed by Amy's ear, but it was too late.

She was already in the air.

It was like falling into a tornado. The wind wrapped around Amy, and it felt like her skin was going to come loose from her face. The ground was rushing toward her at an alarming rate. She tilted her chin, and the small movement was enough to send her somersaulting through the air.

This was going to be a terrible way to die.

She felt the pressure of a scream lodged in her throat, but she couldn't let it out. Her vocal cords were frozen. Everything was frozen. It was like her body was encased in ice.

She couldn't tell which way was up, and knew she couldn't activate the parachute until she was in the proper position. If she could move her arms at all.

The wind flipped her over so she was on her stomach. The landmarks that had looked so tiny in the plane were growing rapidly.

I can do this, Amy told herself. I have to. She heard Duncan's voice in her head.

Keep your back arched for stability.

She pulled her shoulders back and bent her knees, like they'd practiced during training.

Keep your arms and legs at equal distances to maintain control.

She chanted the instructions to herself like a prayer.

Check your altimeter.

Amy grunted as she forced her arm up, fighting the wind to bring it close enough to read the device.

Eight thousand feet.

Should she pull her chute now?

Sixty-five hundred feet.

The ground was getting closer. She could make out the tops of trees.

She reached her hand back to yank the cord, but felt nothing but air. She tried the other side. Nothing.

The sob that had been stuck in her throat released. Tears poured down her face, and the trees turned to green blurs.

Five thousand feet.

The green blurs grew larger.

Forty-five hundred feet.

Using all her strength, she forced her hand back one more time and felt her fingers close around the handle. She pulled as hard as she could.

There was a *whoosh*ing sound and she was yanked up in the air like a string puppet, though it felt like her stomach had come loose and was still falling without her.

Her speed decreased and, suddenly, she was floating.

Her heart was beating so fast she thought it was going to splatter against her rib cage. She forced herself to take a deep breath. She could do this.

A field came into view. Amy tried to forget the fact that most skydiving accidents involved failed landings. She didn't care if she broke every bone in her body, as long as she lived.

She brought her knees up to her chest and braced for impact. Her feet hit the dirt and she tumbled forward, somersaulting a few times before landing on her back with a heavy *thud*. A jolt of pain shot through her, but she barely yelped. It was as if all the air had been sucked out of her.

Amy lay on the ground with her parachute twisted around her. She could feel the prickle of grass behind her neck. A small stone lodged under her right calf. A trickle of blood running down her left cheek. It all felt strangely wonderful. She was alive.

Amy wiggled her toes, flexed her feet, and then stood up. She was bruised and dizzy, but she could walk. She scanned the field and could just make out the other Cahills about a half mile away. She wondered if they'd seen her jump alone. Would Dan have already guessed what had happened?

She walked slowly, savoring the feeling of the ground beneath her feet. Part of her wondered if the Vespers were watching her, and she waited for the familiar cloud of anxiety to consume her, but it didn't come. Her heartbeat remained steady.

When Amy finally reached the group, she found them sitting in a circle, laughing as they did imitations of one another in the air. The instructors were standing to the side, unfazed by the routine jump. Dan's cheeks were flushed with excitement as he gestured wildly to Hamilton. Natalie was

trying to smooth her hair. They had no idea how close she'd come to dying. How close the Vespers had come to getting exactly what they wanted.

Hamilton looked up as Amy approached. "Whoa, Ames. What happened to you?"

Amy paused and the others stared at her. She caught Dan's eyes and he jumped to his feet. "Are you okay?" he asked, taking a step forward.

She nodded.

"Where's Teodora?" Jonah asked, looking around the field.

Amy opened her mouth to brief the other Cahills, but then stopped. Living in fear hadn't helped her prepare. All it had done was drive Dan and her apart. She needed to make sure her family was ready, but this wasn't the moment to tell them that their lives were in danger.

"Don't worry about it," Amy said. It felt strange to speak. "Let's head back. We have a bunch of language teachers coming to the house this afternoon."

Madison groaned and Natalie rolled her eyes. Ian brought his hand up to his face like he was smothering a laugh.

Amy drew her shoulders back and raised her chin. "Everyone head to the bus *now*," she said, in a voice that was not her own but somehow sounded familiar.

Jonah raised his eyebrows, but stood up. "Come on, y'all," he said. Ian, Reagan, and Hamilton rose with him, but Madison and Natalie remained seated.

"You heard me," Amy said. "Move it." The girls got to their feet, shot her a confused look, and started walking toward the bus.

Dan hung back for a moment and then turned to Amy. "Are you sure you're okay?" The color drained from his face as he looked into Amy's eyes. "Did something happen up there?"

"I'm fine." She meant it. "Come on," she said, smiling for the first time since she'd stepped on the plane. "We need to get to the bus before Ian plugs his iPod into the speakers."

Dan shuddered. "I'd rather face a thousand Vespers than listen to Beethoven."

A few hours ago, the thought of a thousand Vespers would've made Amy's stomach curl. But now, nothing seemed impossible. She would be ready to fight. They all would.

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